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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine if advisory councils, mandated by Public Law 94-482, are having a measurable impact on vocational education programs in South Carolina. Data received from 49 area vocational centers indicated that 2,170 persons were serving as advisory council and committee members to these centers. All reported advisory members were mailed questionnaires, with a 41 percent response rate (872). Through the responses, two types of advisory committees were identified--advisory councils and craft advisory committees. The impact of advisory groups was measured by determining if the advisory group had made recommendations to education administrators and if these recommendations had been implemented to some extent. Analysis of individual member responses on a statewide basis revealed that the great majority (70 percent) of the individual respondents viewed their advisory group as having no impact on the vocational education programs they served. Less than one-third of the advisory members reported that recommendations had been made and implemented. Differences were found between positive advisory groups and those who reported negative impact. The study reached the following conclusions: (1) advisory members and advisory groups generally appeared not to be having an impact or having only minimal impact on vocational education programs in South Carolina: (2) the impact on vocational education programs brought about by advisory committees serving area vocational centers varied considerably: and (3) advisory councils were the most successful advisory group relating to vocational education programs. Based on these findings, 13 recommendations for achieving successful advisory group operation were made. (KC)

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A Summary Of

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE IMPACT OF ADVISORY COMMITTEES

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PREFACE

This document represents a summary of a study entitled "An Investigation of the Impact of Advisory Committees on Vocational Education in South Carolina". The research was performed by Phillip L. Latham, a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina, in cooperation with the South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Vocational Education, Research Coordinating Unit in 1980-1981. The consulative services provided by Mr. Latham ensured a fair and impartial examination of the impact advisory councils and committees are having on vocational education.

This summary presents the purpose of the study, methodology, conclusion, and recommendations. The recommendations submitted by Mr. Latham will be studied carefully by the Office of Vocational Education. Consideration will be given to each of the recommendations in terms of feasibility and strategies for inclusion in the annual program improvement plan.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Public Law 94-482, enacted in 1976, requires state governments to establish advisory councils at the local level where the disbursement of federal funds is involved. This act mandated the states to "establish a local advisory council to provide such agency with advice on current job needs and on the relevancy of courses being offered by such agency in meeting such needs". The Act further implied that states were encouraged to establish these councils at the program level if the benefits would justify such action.

State education officials in South Carolina reinforced the federal mandate with the passage of the Education Finance Act of 1977. This Act mandated the establishment of advisory councils at each school and described the role that advisory councils play. In addition to assisting in the preparation of the annual school report, the advisory councils were directed to study program offerings and make recommendations for improvement based on the needs of the students. The councils also were to propose strategy for the expenditure of funds to achieve specific goals and objectives as related to educational programs.

Purpose of the Study

The central question to be answered in this research study is: Are advisory committees having an impact on the vocational education programs in South Carolina?

The study was limited to determining if advisory committees were having a measurable impact on vocational education programs in South Carolina. It did not attempt to analyze the quality of advisory committee membership or operation. Additionally, the study did not attempt to defend or attack the basic concept of the advisory committee function.

METHODOLOGY

Identification of Respondents

The initial effort of this study dealt with the determiniation of the makeup of the advisory member population. The data received from 49 area vocational centers indicated that 2,170 advisory members were serving as advisory council and committee members to these centers. There were 57 area vocational centers in operation at the time of this investigation; however, advisory member mailing data was not received from eight area vocational centers.

All reported advisory members were surveyed. Completed questionnaires were returned by 891 persons who identified themselves as advisory members. An additional 283 persons returned questionnaires with notation to the effect that they were not members of any advisory group. Another 133 questionnaires were returned by the post office as "address unknown". Those not responding to the survey totaled 872 persons. The completed questionnaires amounted to a 41% response rate.

Included among the returned questionnaires were 202 questionnaires with written comments by respondents. The majority of the written comments conveyed one of two messages:

1. that the respondent was not a member of any committee and had no idea why he had received a survey questionnaire; and

2. that the respondent was contacted concerning advisory membership but that he had not heard from the area vocational center since the initial contact. In some instances, more than two years had elapsed since the initial contact was made by the area vocational centers.

Data Collection

This investigation was conducted by means of a survey of all reported advisory committee members serving area vocational centers in South Carolina. Two mailings were planned to gather the data. The time elapsing between the first and second mailing was three weeks. Instructions for completing the questionnaire urged the respondents to complete and return the questionnaire within seven days.

The package sent to each advisory member included a letter of explanation, instructions for completing the questionnaire, a questionnaire (with identification label attached) and a stamped, self-addressed envelope for returning the completed questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The data derived from the survey were examined using individual advisory member, advisory committee, and area vocational centers as the units of analysis. Additionally, the data were analyzed by advisory committee type. Two types of advisory committees were identified - advisory councils, and craft advisory committees. Advisory councils are referred to as advisory councils or councils. Craft advisory committees are discussed using the term advisory committees. The terms are defined as follows:

Advisory councils are those advisory groups that are mandated by state and federal law. Usually, a single advisory council is located at each school level.

Advisory committees provide input for educational programs at the program level. In most cases, several advisory committees serve each school. Advisory committes were not mandated by law when this investigation took place; however, their use was encouraged at all levels of

government.

The impact of advisory councils and advisory committees was measured by determining if the advisory group had made recommendations to education administrators and if these recommendations had been implemented to some extent. Advisory group members taking part in the survey were provided a list of sixteen committee operating areas from which members could choose one or more areas in which recommendations had been made and implemented. The sixteen areas provided to the advisory members for selection were comprised of those areas of responsibilities and duties that could logically be derived from advisory duties as outlined in the Education Finance Act and South Carolina Department of Education publications. Each respondent was also provided the opportunity to add areas of committee recommendation and implementation in the event that the comprehensive list of sixteen committee operating areas proved insufficient.

It was recognized that advisory groups may have an impact on education programs even though recommendations are not made or implemented. It is logical that advisory groups exert influence simply because they exist; however, this investigation was confined to determining if direct, measurable impact had resulted from the actions of the advisory group.

Based on survey data related to the measure of impact on vocational education programs and on the basis of advisory group operating practices, the advisory groups were segregated into three classifications. Those advisory groups that made recommendations and had their recommendations implemented were classified as "positive" advisory groups. The remaining advisory groups consisted of all advisory groups that were not successful in having their recommendations implemented. This latter group was further

subdivided on the basis of their group operating practices. Those advisory groups that appeared to be organized and operating on a regular schedule but did not have any recommendations accepted were classified as "neutral" advisory groups. The advisory groups that appeared unorganized and were not operating on a regular schedule were classified as "negative" advisory groups.

Results

Analysis of individual member responses on a statewide basis revealed that the great majority of the individual respondents viewed their advisory group as having no impact on the vocational education programs which they served. Statewide, 70% of the respondents reported that their advisory group had no recommendations implemented. Less than one-third (30%) of the advisory members reported that recommendations had been made and implemented.

Analysis of the data by advisory group provided almost identical results as discussed above for individual advisory members. The vast majority (68%) of the advisory groups had no recommendations implemented. Only 32% of the advisory groups reported that recommendations had been made and implemented.

Area vocational centers varied widely concerning the impact made by advisory groups serving each center. A small percentage (6%) of the area vocational centers exhibited solely positive advisory groups. Fourteen area vocational centers (29%) exhibited solely negative advisory groups and two area vocational centers (4%) exhibited only neutral advisory groups. The remaining area vocational centers exhibited more than one type of advisory group.

Data from two area vocational centers were compared to see if a difference in advisory group structure or operating procedures would be apparent. The two area vocational centers compared were chosen at random from two groups of area vocational centers that exhibited a majority of advisory groups as positive and negative. The results of this comparison indicated that advisory members from the area vocational center with negative advisory groups were unsure of fundamental information relating to their advisory groups' functions. In sharp contrast, members of the advisory groups from the area vocational center with positive advisory groups were very sure of their answers to the same questions. One question examined dealt with the determination of whether regular advisory group minutes were kept. Possible responses included yes, no, and not sure. Members of negative advisory groups were not sure in 60% of the cases. In contrast, members of the positive advisory groups were sure in all cases.

The sharp contrast between respondents of positive and negative advisory groups from two area vocational centers was even more distict when considering the responses of those committee members who were sure of what was happening. Members of positive advisory groups from one area vocational center reported that regular minutes were kept in 92% of the cases. Respondents from the area vocational center with all negative advisory groups reported that regular minutes were kept in only 33% of the cases. Advisory members of the area vocational center with positive advisory groups received written descriptions of their duties in 61% of the cases, whereas, members of the negative advisory groups received written descriptions of their duties in only 31% of the cases. Other

differences in responses between advisory groups representing the two area vocational centers were apparent. Advisory members of positive advisory groups were more experienced in advisory group operations, their advisory group was made up of fewer members, they had better member attendance at advisory meetings, the advisory group met more often, and the positive advisory group was subjected to more requests by education officials for help and suggestions than were the negative advisory groups. Another interesting difference noted was that the positive advisory groups utilized additional resources for improving advisory group operations in 100% of the cases, whereas members of negative advisory groups reported that they utilized additional resources for advisory group improvement in 27% of the cases.

Of particular interest in this investigation was the determination of whether there were identifiable differences in program impact as accomplished by advisory councils and advisory committees. A comparison of positive advisory councils and positive committees statewide was undertaken. The results indicated that several differences in advisory group operation existed. A much higher proportion of advisory councils were having an impact on educational programs as opposed to the accomplishments of advisory committees. A majority (53%) of advisory councils were rated as having an impact on educational programs versus 23% of the advisory committees. Additionally, the proportion of non-functioning (negative) advisory groups exhibited by advisory councils and advisory committees was 35% and 72% respectively. Proportionately, more than twice as many advisory committees were non-functioning when compared to advisory councils. The non-functioning advisory groups did not have recommendations implemented,

did not keep regular minutes, met less frequently than those groups that had recommendations implemented and members of these non-functioning advisory groups were not knowledgeable of their groups' basic functions.

The detailed comparison of the structure and activities of positive advisory councils and positive advisory committees revealed that substantial differences existed between the two groups concerning advisory groups operations. The major differences noted in this comparison included: membership selection methods, advisory group chairman selection methods, frequency of contact by education officials, and frequency of advisory group meetings.

Further data analysis involved the determination of the existence of differences in operating practices and/or structure among advisory councils. A comparison of advisory council operations revealed that numerous differences existed between positive councils and negative councils.

The primary differences in council operation noted during the comparison were:

1. positive council members were generally more experienced advisory members;
2. positive councils met more often and had a greater proportion of the council members present at the council meetings;
3. positive council members were more knowledgeable of the reasons for the council's existence;
4. positive councils had more requests from education officials for help and/or suggestions;
5. negative council members were unsure of what was happening concerning basic council structure and operations; and finally,
6. more negative councils had employees of the center as chairman of the councils.

The final area of data analysis included a comparison of advisory committee operational procedures for all advisory committees. This was accomplished to determine if differences existed among advisory committees. The

results of this comparison provided similar results as those discussed for differences among advisory councils. Negative advisory committee members were less experienced than were positive advisory committee members. Negative advisory committee members were very unsure of what was happening concerning their own committee's operations. In contrast, positive advisory committee members were much more knowledgeable of what was happening within their own committee.

CONCLUSIONS

The preceding section presented the summarized findings of this investigation as they relate to the central question posed in the problem. Several conclusions appear to be warranted based on the investigation. The conclusions are based on the static data gathered during the study; no projections were made.

The method chosen to recognize advisory group impact contains the possible weakness that advisory groups may have had an impact that this investigation did not reveal. By their very existence it is recognized that advisory groups may exert influence and that educational programs may have been affected without overt recommendations being made and implemented. It is feasible to assume that advisory groups influence educational programs indirectly as well as directly. The impact that may have resulted because advisory groups exist but which were not directly identifiable are ignored in the following conclusions. For this investigation, only those advisory groups that were successful in having their recommendations implemented were considered to have had an impact on vocational education programs.

The conclusions of this investigation of the impact of advisory groups on vocational education programs in South Carolina are presented on the following pages. Users of the investigation should bear in mind the foregoing explanation of a possible weakness, the assumptions, definitions, and delimitations (presented in this chapter and preceding chapters).

Conclusions Relating to the Advisory Member Population Statewide

Advisory members generally appeared not to be having an impact on the vocational education programs in South Carolina.

1. Advisory members generally do not view their role of advisory member in a very prestigious manner. A high proportion (40%) of the reported advisory member population did not complete a brief questionnaire relating to the advisory function. Over one-third of the reported advisory member population failed to respond to two separate requests for information on advisory group activities.
2. Advisory member records, as maintained by the area vocational centers, were apparently inaccurate in many cases and appeared to reflect a lack of attention by area vocational center officials. Thirteen percent (13%) of those persons identified by area vocational center directors two weeks prior to the survey responded to the survey by noting that they were not members of any advisory group. Additionally, another 6% of the survey questionnaires were returned by the post office as "address unknown".
3. A great majority of the reported advisory members were not having an impact on the educational programs. Analysis of returned questionnaires revealed that 70% of the reported advisory members had no recommendations implemented.
4. Advisory members in general were not performing the duties as prescribed in the Education Finance Act of 1977. Assuming that no education programs are perfect and therefore all educational programs could be improved, advisory members are not affecting educational programs as envisioned by federal and state legislation.
5. A majority (62%) of the reported advisory groups were non-functioning.

Comments on returned questionnaires, non-member responses to the survey, and survey questionnaires returned by the post office as "address unknown", strongly suggested that a large number of reported advisory groups existed on paper only. These groups were non-functioning. Members of advisory groups classified as non-functioning were unable to answer the most basic questions concerning their advisory group's activities.

Conclusions Related to Advisory Committees

Advisory committees were having a minimal impact on vocational education programs in South Carolina.

1. The majority (77%) of the advisory committees statewide were not having an impact on the programs they served.
2. Less than one-quarter (23%) of the advisory committees were having an impact on vocational education programs.
3. The vast majority (72%) of the advisory committees statewide are non-functioning. A large number of these committees apparently exist on paper only. Many reported advisory members had not had communications with the area vocational center in over a year.

Conclusions Related to Area Vocational Centers

The impact on vocational education programs brought about by advisory committees serving area vocational centers varied considerably.

1. Area vocational centers varied widely on the inclusion of advisory groups in the decision-making process related to improvement of educational programs.
2. A substantial proportion (29%) of the area vocational center directors appeared not to be providing the leadership, encouragement, and support

necessary for enthusiastic operation of the advisory groups serving these centers. These area vocational centers exhibited non-functioning advisory groups. Several area vocational centers exhibited four, five, and six non-functioning advisory groups. Conversely, several other area vocational centers exhibited solely positive advisory groups.

Conclusions Related to Advisory Councils

Advisory councils were the most successful advisory group relating to the question of impact on vocational education programs.

1. Advisory councils were operating more successfully than advisory committees. The majority (53%) of the advisory councils in operation were having an impact on vocational education programs versus only 23% of the advisory committees.
2. Apparently, all area vocational centers are not in compliance with federal and state directives that advisory councils be established. Data received in the survey suggested that six area vocational centers were not utilizing advisory councils. The same six centers had reported the use of advisory committees.
3. A sizeable proportion (35%) of the advisory councils were classified as non-functioning councils. These councils appeared to exist on paper only and in fact were not operational to any extent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this investigation demonstrated that differences in successful advisory group operations were apparent for advisory councils, advisory committees, and area vocational centers.

The data derived through the survey of advisory members suggested that the following factors may be critical to the success or failure of advisory groups in South Carolina in having recommendations implemented. Based on these findings, the following factors appeared to be critical in achieving successful advisory group operation.

Recommendation #1

A statewide review of advisory council operations should be made to determine where the best practices and procedures are in use. From this review, a recommended set of standard advisory council procedures should be established statewide. The review of advisory council operations should include, as a minimum, the following areas:

* Advisory member selection methods
* Record keeping procedures
* Council member job descriptions
* Council member term of office
* Advisory council chairman selection criteria

Recommendation #2

The procedures recommended for advisory councils in recommendation #1 should be accomplished for advisory committees statewide.

Recommendation #3

Advisory council members and advisory committee members term of office should be staggered to insure a minimum of a two year term. Additionally, the number of new advisory members (no previous advisory member experience) should be limited to insure that one-half of the advisory group consists of advisory members with at least one year's experience as an advisory member.

Recommendation #4

Area vocational center directors should be directly involved in the recruitment of advisory members.

Recommendation #5

Area Vocational center directors should attend and participate in advisory group meetings.

Recommendation #6

Advisory groups should maintain written minutes of meetings. Copies of these minutes should be provided to district superintendents and area vocational center directors.

Recommendation #7

Advisory members should be provided with a written description of their duties and responsibilities. This job description should be specific as well as flexible.

Recommendation #8

Advisory members should be provided appropriate training in the various areas of responsiblities outlined in their written job descriptions. This training should be accomplished within six months of their initial appointment as an advisory member.

Recommendation #9

Advisory groups should establish a regular and frequent meeting schedule that will allow advisory members to adequately fulfill their written job descriptions.

Recommendation #10

The chairman of the advisory groups should not be an employee of the area vocational center.

Recommendation #11

An employee of each area vocational center should be assigned the responsibility of maintaining current and accurate information pertaining to advisory membership data.

Recommendation #12

A list of advisory group recommendations should be compiled semi-annually by each advisory group and submitted to the area vocational center director and district superintendent. The list of recommendations should include, as a minimum, a description of the recommendations, the date the recommendations were made, and the status of the recommendations.

Recommendation #13

A relataively small amount of funds should be made available, on a competitive basis, to advisory councils statewide. The funds would be used to support innovative ideas for program improvement.